DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 717 CS 507 537

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TITLE The Adult Learner in the Communication Classroom: A Selected Review and Critical Evaluation of Literature.
PUB DATE 26 Apr 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Pittsburgh, PA, April 25-28, 1991).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; *Classroom Communication; *College Students; *Communication Research; Higher Education; Nontraditional Students; *Speech Communication; *Student Needs; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

Noting that the adult learner is becoming an increasingly prevalent presence in the classroom, this paper presents a literature review and critical evaluation of the overall effort made by communication researchers to study the phenomenon of the adult learner in the college classroom. The paper first reviews 13 articles in 3 categories of research (special needs and characteristics of adult learners, methods for increasing teaching effectiveness relevant to adult learners, and instructional and program design for adult students) published in communication/speech journals pertaining to the adult learner in communication education and instructional communication. Following the review, the paper offers a critical evaluation of the state of applicable research published in academic communication journals, and concludes by identifying directions for future research. Seventeen references are attached. (SR)

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The Adult Learner in the Communication Classroom:

A Selected Review and Critical Evaluation

of Literature

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April 1991

Presented at the annual
Eastern Communication Association Convention,
Instructional Practices Division
held in Pittsburgh, PA
April 26, 1991

CS507537

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THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: A SELECTED REVIEW AND CRITICAL EVALUATION OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The adult learner is becoming an increasingly prevalent presence in the college classroom. According to Miller (1989), "The percentage of adult students in higher education has grown from less than 25% to about 43% in the last decade alone" (p. 70). He goes on to remark that by the year 2000, half of all higher education students will fit into the category of adult learners (p. 70). Given this burgeoning adult student population, it seems obvious that teachers and administrators will have to become more responsive to and concerned about the adult learner. Certainly, researchers and teachers in the area of instructional communication should be sensitive to the fact that various student sub-populations require special consideration and preparation. Therefore, it is necessary to review the literature which has been produced within the discipline of speech communication in order to assess our progress and decide on future directions.

Initially, it is critical to define a few terms. Although there are a number of ways in which scholars researching this subject have categorized **adult learners**, the common thread referred to by all of

them is age. It seems somewhat arbitrary and artificial to set a number and say "that's the limit; cross that line and you're an adult learner." But, being reasonable, we can isolate several defining characteristics. First, adult learners are returning to school. They may not have attempted to pursue the college degree at the "traditional" age of seventeen or eighteen years. If they did, they left higher education at some point to pursue other interests (such as family, financial necessity, difficulty in school, among other possibilities). Secondly, as necessitated by the first criterion, they are older than the average student with whom they must compete. Most researchers have agreed on 25 years of age and up as an acceptable definitional boundary (Giczkowski, 1990; Watkins, 1989). Finally, the adult learner has generally had more life experience than the typical student, and this will shape their perceptions and needs as a student. **Adult education**, for the purposes of this study, will refer to the education of these adult learners in programs for college credit, sponsored by college institutions, wherein the program is not solely a component of an in-house industrial training and development service. In other words, the adult learner is pursuing "an education" rather than isolated skill/service training or recreational pursuits (generally packaged as non-credit options). Finally, I will focus on research done

which pursues issues **relevant to communication education and instructional communication**, such as teaching methods, distinct learning abilities/difficulties, communication concerns, learner motivation, and relationship between teacher and student.

RATIONALE

The education of this unique and increasingly prominent group of higher education students should be of great interest to scholars in Speech Communication education and instructional communication. Rubin and Feezel (1986) describe speech education as focusing on developing effective strategies helpful for teaching communication (p. 113). They also define the term "instructional communication" as "research that focuses on how communication is best used in classroom settings of all subject areas and grades" (1986, p. 113). So communication researchers should not only focus on how to most effectively teach adult students in the communication classroom, but should also help to isolate and develop effective educational communication-related strategies for teaching adults in all educational contexts.

Not only does the education of the adult learner fall within the domain of research on communication education and instructional communication, but we, as communication researchers, have a significant

amount of expertise in areas of great interest to adult learners. Wolvin (1984) demonstrates that adult students in communication courses indicate a very strong interest in improving their speaking and listening skills, seeing these skills as vital to their future success (pp. 260-270). Cynthia Berryman-Fink (1982) indicates that this should not only be of interest to communication researchers, but that this is an obligation. She states:

> Regardless of what specific communication courses for nontraditional learners are devised, it is imperative that the field of speech communication seize its rightful opportunity and accept its inevitable challenge of developing communication-based curricula fundamental to society's lifelong learning goals. (p. 354)

In arguing for more emphasis in instructional communication research on how to teach adult students, Engleberg (1984) argues that because adults have such special motivations and needs as students, we must focus on andragogical rather than pedagogical teaching methods. This, according to her, involves assessing the special needs of adult learners so that we can design our teaching to offer them the optimal learning experience, integrating different classroom formats, emphasizing facilitation rather than relying predominantly on lecture, and involving the student in the process of learning. All of these concerns are extremely relevant to the

field of communication.

The objective of this paper is to review and present a critical evaluation of the overall effort made by communication researchers to study the phenomenon of the adult learner in the college classroom. This review and evaluation involved searching, categorizing, and reviewing all articles published in communication/speech journals which pertain to the adult learner pursuing an education in the college classroom as relevant to communication education and instructional communication. Following this review, a critical evaluation of the state of applicable research published in academic communication journals will be offered and directions which future research should pursue will be identified.

SEARCH PROCEDURES

This literature review search encompassed all of the communication journals which are indexed regularly in the *Index to Speech Communication Journals* (Matlon and Facciola, 1987) from the journals' initial publication through 1985. This includes the *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Communication Monographs, Communication Education, Southern Speech Communication Journal, Western Journal of Speech Communication, Central States Speech Journal, Communication Quarterly, ACA Bulletin, Philosophy and Rhetoric, Journal of Communication, Human Communicatior*

Research, Journalism Quarterly, and *Argumentation and Advocacy.* I searched through 1985 using the Matlon and Facciola reference guide (1987), using the key words "teaching," "adult learner," adult education," "older students," non-traditional students," "facilitation," "androgogy," and "discussion." (Teaching was the most helpful key term). I then conducted a shelf-search of all relevant journals published since 1985 up to July 1990. I have included in the review all articles (excluding book reviews, but including essays and commentaries structured as articles and listed with the other articles in the journal issue's table of contents as main contributions) which address teaching and learning as they impact the adult student pursuing college credit.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are thirteen articles which discuss issues relevant to this review of literature. Three general categories of research emerged: 1) special needs and characteristics of adult students, 2) methods for increasing teaching effectiveness relevant to adult learners, and 3) instructional and program design for adult students. The next section of this paper will summarize each of the articles within each category, presented in chronological order.

Special Needs and Characteristics of Adult Students

The earliest article addressing the special needs and characteristics of adult learners was written by Buchan (1944) who examined communication problems of adult learners, focusing mainly in the area of public speaking. He described adult learners in communication courses as needing substantial assistance in the areas of grammar and the development of speaking skills which enable them to communicate more effectively and be more successful in general. The conclusions were grounded in professional experience rather than formal research. The second article in this category did not appear for forty more years when Engleberg (1984) examined adult student motivation, categorizing it into three categories: desire for learning, activity, and goal achievement. She also reviewed life cycle theory as relavant to the transitional nature of adult learners, and argues for andragogy as an advisable adaptation to the changing population of higher education. The third article to appear in this category was by Wolvin (1984) who addressed the need to adapt curriculum to the special needs of adult learners. He reported the results of a survey of adult students enrolled in communication courses at the University of Maryland, concluding that adult students are relatively young, in states of transition, and have some communication needs which differ slightly from those of traditional students (for example, to improve

skills used in meetings, briefings, phone calls). Wolvin argued that communication educators must adapt to meet these and other special needs.

These three articles provide only a sketchy insight into the unique needs and characteristics of adult learners. Although they are pointed in the right direction, it is apparent that much more research needs to be done in this area so that we have more than a thumbnail sketch on which to base educational offerings.

Methods for Increasing Teaching Effectiveness Relevant to Adult Learners

Two articles comprised this category. The first one was by Cohen (1964) who surveyed the available audio-visual material designed for improving speaking skills in adults, focusing on the improvement of lexical use, voice production, articulation and enunciation, rhythm, and melody. He described materials available in the form of literature, radio and television programs, films, and records. The second article in this category is by Dance (1968). He began by decrying the lack of research in our field on the adult learner as of 1968. He went on to discuss the nature of the adult student and distinguishing factors of adults as communicators, such as more reliance on self and a more intense need to master speech skills. Dance also made several suggestions for future

research, arguing for more study in the areas of course design, equivalency credit for adult experience, characteristics of teachers who are successful with adult learners, adult student motivation, and how the process of maturity affects speech abilities.

This category is particularly limited. Certainly, there needs to be more research on the ways in which teaching methods can be adapted to the special needs of adult learners. In that the adult learner is a different type of student, it is the responsibility of teaching professionals in all disciplines to discover the most effective way of teaching adults. Having only two articles exploring this area, both over twenty years old, reflects a lack of concern for a category of student which is very likely to have a very definite impact on college populations in upcoming years.

Instructional and Program Design for Adult Students

There were five early articles on the administration of adult education programs. In the first of these articles written in 1935, Densmore published the first article in our field on the adult learner. He discussed the program for teaching practical public speaking to adults under the auspices of the University of Michigan. This was not a researched article and described a range of programs available at that time from radio broadcasts regarding effective public speaking and

pronunciation to regular classroom speech courses for adults. The second article in this category by Lomas (1950), fifteen years later, described the four types of coursework in speech offered at that time by college and university evening programs. He listed regular fundamental speech courses, non-credit public speaking courses and workshops, public speaking courses tailored to industry, and upper division and graduate coursework designed to meet the needs of teachers in service. Lomas indicted the methods of organization used in adult education programs. The third article in this category written by Zelko in 1951 reported the results of a survey conducted to ascertain the interest, need, and practice in speech and related training for adults in industry and college settings. He described current training practices, the need for further advances in training adults in communication skills, and portrays future challenges to the speech professional. Zelko also wrote the fourth article in this category (1954) which described a specific course he taught at Pennsylvania State University to improve the speaking skills of university instructors and administrators. He described and related his future plans for the course. The fifth article in this category came from Dance in 1960. He surveyed evening college speech programs offered by member institutions of the Association of University Evening Colleges. He

described the results of the survey and made three suggestions for improvement: defining the target audience more specifically, making sure that administrators are kept up to date on the philosophy and goals of modern speech education, and offering personal counseling to all prospective adult students.

In the last decade, there have been three articles published in communication journals on the subject of administering programs in adult education. In the first of these, Berryman-Fink (1982) argued that a communication-based curriculum was necessary to any adult education program because the study of communication addresses many of the concerns and needs of adult students (low self-esteem, family relationships, communication skills, personal identity, among others). She described such a communication-based program offered at the University of Cincinnatti. According to Berryman-Fink, the STEPS program helped adult learners in re-entering the college environment by offering them academic counseling, skills courses, simplified bureaucratic procedures, and nontraditional credit assessment. She described the introductory communication course in the program. The second article of the 1980's dedicated to program design for adiults learners is by Dick and East (1989) who examined college communication training offered through

corporate programming, focusing on the reasons that the corporate community is involved in higher education. They argued that it is the responsibility of higher education to offer courses which complement the interests of corporations while still refusing to "vocationalize" the communication curriculum. The final article in this category is by Miller who in 1989 discussed the phenomenon of the increasing adult population, offering a profile of the returning student and assessing problems faced by them (negative self-image, social-familial problems, and an overly practical orientation toward learning). He differentiated between andragogy and pedagogy, detailing the assumptions upon which both are based. Finally, Miller suggested developing administrative structures to aid both adult learners and the faculty who teach them.

This is obviously the largest category, which may reflect a stronger interest in the adult learner at the administrative/planning level of educational institutions than at the more fundamental level of instruction. Only a few of the articles are recent enough to provide guidance for the current infusion of adult learners into college classrooms. But, these few articles do demonstrate that institutional and programmatic planning needs to take adult learners into account and design programs which are tailored to their needs and learning styles.

DISCUSSION

These articles, as valuable as they are to our field because of their specific focus and usefulness, comprise a limited body of knowledge. There has not been enough published in speech communication journals on adult education and the challenges it raises for not only the study and teaching of communication courses, but also for researchers in the area of instructional communication. This is corroborated by Rubin and Feezel (1986). They conducted a survey of prominent researchers in communication education and instructional communication in order to discern their opinions as to the priority and sufficiency ranking of 24 separate research sub-areas within the broader research area. Priority ranking indicates the priority which the researchers ascribe to generating research in the category. Sufficiency ranks prioritize the areas according to the extent to which the researchers surveyed feel that the research attention given the respective categories has been sufficient (Rubin and Feezel, 1986). Although different student sub-populations aren't listed, one of the areas is "learner age as related to communication instruction" (Rubin and Feezel, 1986, p. 116) and it seems likely that articles which specifically address the teaching of adult students would clearly fall into this category. This research category was ranked overall

as nineteenth in priority and twenty-fourth (last) in terms of sufficiency (p. 116). So, it seems apparent that not only is this sort of research not seen as a high priority, but the actual research output reflects an even lower priority. Given the statistics in the beginning of this paper, this failure to study educating adult students regarding communication and developing effective strategies for teaching adults in all areas seems a shortcoming of the research produced to date in speech communication.

It is also interesting to note that although the frequency of article production in this area has increased as of the last decade, there are still few articles relevant to the adult student. There have been only eleven articles on the subject in speech communication journals throughout the last forty years and only five articles in the last twenty years. This is unfortunate because adult learners have special communication needs, and there seems to have been little attention paid to addressing those needs. The adult learner communicates differently and learns differently. They have very different motivations from the more traditional-age student. Therefore, they need to be *taught* differently. We, as communication educators, cannot fulfill the needs of adult students if we have not thoroughly addressed the nature of those needs, the impact which those needs will have on classroom content and ecology, and the means by

which we can fulfill them.

The bulk of the research which has been conducted has regarded instructional and program design. This may reflect the fact that adult education has become more of an issue at the administrative level than it has in the classroom. Admninistrators deal with enrollment figures and budgets more closely than do individual faculty members, and it may be that they are quicker to see the impact which changing trends in higher education are having upon the population of America's colleges and universities. There has been very little data generated in our field rergarding the unique needs, motivations, and skills of the adult learner or how to maximize our teaching effectiveness with this new presence in the classroom. In essence, what has happened is that research on the adult learner in the communication classroom has been conducted backwards. Even though little attention has been paid to the needs and motivations of adult learners, the bulk of research has been dedicated to planning and programming. But certainly this is a premature response to the changing situation. *First*, we must understand the nature of the adult student. Only then can we effectively design curriculum and teaching methods which will be most effective and rewarding for them.

It is clear that all departments within the college or university need

to be equipped to meet the particular needs of all students, especially students who comprise such a distinct, large, and growing segment of our students. As was indicated in the rationale for this paper, researchers in the areas of communication education and instructional communication are particularly qualified to study this portion of our student population. It seems imperative that researchers in speech communication need to be paying more attention to the adult student. We need to pursue all areas relevant to the education of adults. It is necessary to continue to generate discussion regarding the design and implementation of adult instruction. Research also needs to focus on the demands of the adult student: practical knowledge, desired skills, learning tendencies, difficulties with various forms of communication, and adult student perceptions of teachers and relationships with teachers to name a few areas. We additionally need to initiate investigations into how teachers can maximize their effectiveness as instructors of adult students: more versus less effective teaching methods and strategies, optimal feedback, facilitation methods, incorporating the student into classroom decision-making, making the most of androgogy as a teaching tool for all students, and so on. Only through learning as much as we can about the special needs and abilities of adult students can we develop instruction which

demonstrates our respect for them as students and our sincere desire to make the most of their educational endeavors.

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